

THE BIG THORNTON BURGESS Story-Book

TALES FROM THE STORYTELLER'S HOUSE

WHILE THE STORY-LOG BURNS

By
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UNDER THE TITLES:

**TALES FROM THE STORYTELLER'S HOUSE
and WHILE THE STORY-LOG BURNS**

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**TALES FROM THE
STORYTELLER'S HOUSE**

CHAPTER I

THE OLD HOUSE

IN the early October dusk a deer stood at the edge of Laughing Brook where it makes the turn at the foot of Esker Hill. He was motionless, tense, his slender muzzle lifted to sift from the evening air the various scents it bore, each a message with a meaning all its own. Satisfied that all was well, the great buck relaxed. The tenseness disappeared. Slowly the beautiful antlered head was bent to the clear water running at his feet. He drank, lifted his head quickly at the quavering call of a screech owl, then drank again.

His thirst quenched, he waded in where the water was shallow. For some time he stood there at ease but with an air of expectancy. Now and then his white flag was flicked a trifle impatiently. All the time his big broad ears were slowly moved so as to catch all the faint air currents that might bring to him news for good or ill.

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The shadows thickened as they settled over the wooded sides of Esker Hill, and down across the gentle slope to the Old House beneath the huge elm that for nearly two hundred years had shaded the back door, and for the greater part of that time had protectingly spread its great arms over the moss-grown roof.

From the time when, as a spindle-legged, spotted fawn at his mother's side, the big buck had first visited this favorite drinking place at Laughing Brook, he had been familiar with the Old House. To him it was as much a part of the landscape as the hill itself, solid, substantial, friendly, not to be feared even though, as he knew well, it gave shelter to man. Often after his evening drink as, mildly curious, he had stood watching the faint firelight flickering on the quaint small-paned windows, the door had opened and mingling with the odor of wood smoke the man smell had been brought to his sensitive nostrils. It brought with it nothing of fear or distrust. The twin spirits of love and gentle kindness dwelt in the Old House, and always the message from the open door was of peace and good will.

Voices, far down the road that winds past the

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Old House and is lost among the trees at a distant turn, caused the twitching ears to set forward so as to catch every sound from that direction. He knew those voices. He had heard them often. They were the voices of children. In them were laughter and happiness. For a few minutes the great buck, motionless, alert, yet with no trace of uneasiness, stood listening. Then, content, for it was for this that he had been waiting, he flicked his tail, lightly bounded across the brook and silently made his way through the woods to the top of the hill and along the ridge to a favorite feeding ground. It was the children's hour, and in the Old House the Story-teller awaited their coming.

The Old House was a landmark known far and wide. To the children of the neighborhood it seemed that it must always have been there. It was as easy to imagine a time when the hill back of it had not yet been fashioned by the ancient glacier that the wise men say brought from far away the sand and gravel of which it is made, as to picture a time before the Old House was built. There were times when it was not difficult to believe that it never had been built but, like its neighbor, the giant elm, had sprung from the soil and must be

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rooted deep in the earth it hugged so closely.

Long before the battle of Bunker Hill it stood there. Many children had lived in it, loved it, grown up in it and gone away. Boys and girls of several generations had played around the broad hearth, watched the leaping flames in its wide stone fireplace, and dreamed the beautiful dreams that only children know. And after the children Old Age in its feebleness had dwelt there alone. Now it was the Storyteller's house, and once each week in the early evening the children of the neighborhood gathered beneath its moss-grown, low-eaved roof for the tale that should be told while in the great black throat of the chimney the story-log burned, a log picked out and brought by one of the children.

This evening it was to be little Mary's story-log, and as in the soft dusk the children came up the road her brother David was carrying it for her. They loved the Old House, all of them. As they came in sight of it they paused for a moment. It had become a habit to pause just there to look up the road at its shadowy outline. To them its age was nothing short of tremendous.

"My dad says that when that ol' house was built

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there were bears in the woods around here. I bet a bear has looked in those winders more'n once," said Billy Blake.

"I wish one would look in while we are there." That was Midge Fuller.

"Ho! Listen to Midge! She jumps up in a chair and hollers if she sees a mouse, and now she says she'd like to see a bear looking in the window! You'd die of fright; you know you would, Midge!" hooted Jimmy Andrews.

"I wouldn't. I'd shoot him," declared Freddie Rogers.

"Yes you would! What with?" demanded Billy.

"That ol' gun that hangs on the wall," was the prompt reply, whereupon everybody laughed, for Freddie was only six and small for his age. The old flintlock musket was half again as tall as he.

"There were Injuns around then, I betcha. I would rather have a bear looking in the winder than an Injun. You know those ol' cuts on the big back door that is locked with a bar? I bet those were made by a tommyhawk," contributed Johnny Brown.

"I wonder. I guess the Old House is old enough for that," said Frances. "The Storyteller says that

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when it was first built people thought that the Sabbath began at sunset on Saturday and ended at sunset on Sunday. From sunset to sunset no work was done, not the tiniest bit, that wasn't absolutely necessary. Of course the horses and cows and pigs and hens had to be fed, but no housework was done. They didn't even wash the dishes."

"Huh! I should think that that would have mixed the week all up. I wouldn't have liked that," cried Rosemary.

"I guess they didn't have any Saturday night movies then," Billy remarked. Then turning to David he added in a tone of disgust, "Hey, you ol' butterfingers, if you are going to keep dropping that story-log you better let someone else carry it."

Jean began to run. "Come on!" she shouted over her shoulder. "The light in the window is winking at us, and you know what that means! It means we're late and we won't get any story if we don't hurry up. Come on! Hurry, everybody!"

A few minutes later, some of them still out of breath, they were in the long, low living room with its great hand-hewn beams fastened with wood pegs. It had once been kitchen as well, for in the early days all the cooking had to be done at the

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great fireplace with its brick oven and swinging crane. The latter still carried its pothooks and black iron kettles. Suspended beneath the mantel, and arranged on the hearth on both sides of the fireplace, were queer implements and utensils used by the cooks of long ago, a never ending source of wonder and delight to the children.

Hanging coats and hats on a row of wooden pegs, they were soon busy before the fire toasting marshmallows and popping corn. When the last marshmallow had turned to a luscious, entrancing brown, and the last kernel of corn had danced all around the popper finally to burst with a sharp pop, the Storyteller signalled little Mary to bring him her story-log.

You don't know what a story-log is? Why, it is a log that burns while a story is being told. It is a very special log; a just-so log. On each story night there at the Old House a boy or a girl brought a small log. With proper ceremony this was placed on the fire. While it burned the Storyteller must tell a story. It couldn't be too long a story, for it wouldn't do to keep the children up too late. Of course not. And it wouldn't do to have too short a story lest the listeners should feel that they had

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been cheated. No indeed, that wouldn't do; it wouldn't do at all to have too short a story.

So you see how important it was that the story-log should be of just the right size, not too big and not too small; most certainly not too small. It had to be selected with great care to be sure that it would not burn too long, yet equally sure that it would not burn out too quickly. The children took turns in bringing the story-log and, as you know, this time it was little Mary's turn. Very proud and a little excited was she as she passed the small log to the Storyteller.

CHAPTER II

THE MOST PRECIOUS THING IN THE WORLD

As her story-log was carefully laid on the fire little Mary stood in front of the fireplace, her hands folded in front of her, her big blue eyes wide with excitement and earnestness, for this was her first story-log. Solemnly she made the exhortation to the fire which always followed the placing of a log on the fire.

“Fire, fire burn my log!
Snap and crackle! Leap and glow!
Turn to smoke and ashes but
Not too fast and not too slow!

In its heart a story lies;
Only you can set it free.
Fire, fire burn my log
While the tale is told to me!”

For a few minutes there was no sound save the crackling and snapping of red-hot coals. The lights

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had been turned out and in the glow of the fire the half circle of intent faces watched the story-log, little Mary's face the most intent of all. Suddenly Mary began to dance and clap her hands.

"Goody! goody! My story-log has begun to burn!" she cried excitedly.

"Why so it has, Mary. So it has," said the Storyteller. "Well, my dear, of whom shall the story be to-night?"

"Peter Rabbit! Please! oh please! I just love Peter!" cried the little girl, jumping up and down as an excited small girl can.

The Storyteller laughed. "I guess we all do, Mary," said he. "All right, about Peter it shall be. Have I ever told you children how Peter once found the most precious thing in all the great world?"

A chorus in the negative was the prompt response. "What was it — a great big di'mond?" Robert asked.

The Storyteller shook his head. "No, Robert," said he. "No, not a diamond; something a great deal more precious than that. Something so precious that it is without price and many people have gladly given their lives for it. Luckily Peter didn't

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have to do that. Do any of you know why Old Mother Nature gave Peter Rabbit long ears?”

“Sure. So he can hear things,” replied Robert.

The Storyteller’s eyes twinkled. “Of course,” said he. “Sometimes they are things that it is intended he should hear. Sometimes they are things not meant for his ears at all. I suspect that often it is these things that Peter enjoys most. A lot of people are that way, you know. They listen to things they have no business to listen to.”

The Storyteller paused to look around that half circle of faces, and chuckled as not an eye met his, but all gazed somewhat self-consciously into the fire. After a moment he continued.

“Anyway Peter is full of curiosity and is always listening. If he isn’t curious about one thing he is curious about another thing. Sometimes he is curious about many things all at once.

“It happened one day that Peter was taking a nap. He was safely hidden in a bramble-tangle beside the Crooked Little Path. He was wakened by voices. At first he opened his eyes only part way, for he was still half asleep. It wasn’t until he heard a low, sweet voice close by that he realized that